



• ANALYSIS

NATO's Hague Summit: Agenda and Expectations

Rifat Öncel

NATO'S HAGUE SUMMIT: Agenda and Expectations

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This analysis examines the agenda of the NATO leaders' summit to be held in The Hague on June 24-25, 2025, and the possible outcomes of this critical meeting.

SUMMARY

The NATO Summit, scheduled for June 24-25 in The Hague, comes at a critical time since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The change in Washington's leadership and subsequent policy shift is a key factor shaping this year's summit, fundamentally influencing the strategic calculations of European defense and the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, the Israel-Iran conflict risks undermining the summit's overall effectiveness, with the particular risk of U.S. entrapment due to Israel's escalatory strikes against Tehran.

INTRODUCTION

The NATO leaders' summit, to be held on June 24-25 in The Hague, will mark another critical gathering of the alliance since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. NATO, in response, has taken concrete and comprehensive decisions, many of which have already been implemented on the ground. The most significant among them were the decisions to boost defense spending by member states, reinforcing the alliance's eastern flank through new deployment, expansion of joint production and development projects, accelerating defense industry output, and extending military and financial aid to Ukraine.¹

It is fair to say that NATO has played a confidence-building role for member states amid the instability and insecurity triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, both Finland and Sweden, which had long refrained from entering formal alliance commitments, sought swift NATO memberships in response to the heightened threat they perceived from Russia. However, this does not mean that all of the Alliance's intended objectives have been fully achieved. On the contrary, it is evident that fulfilling core goals like increasing defense expenses has been a slow and often difficult process.²

1 "NATO's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine," NATO, 17 February 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_192648.htm (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

2 Ray Furlong, "What's Stopping NATO Countries from Boosting Defense Spending?," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 22 January 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-countries-defense-spending-ukraine/33284708.html> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

The most critical factor shaping this year's summit, however, will likely be the change in U.S. leadership, given President Trump and former President Biden's sharply contrasting views on Ukraine war, NATO, and multilateralism in international politics. While Biden was a staunch institutionalist and a strong supporter of NATO, Trump follows an isolationist foreign policy approach and harbors deep mistrust toward NATO's European allies. Moreover, polls indicate that Trump's foreign policy stance resonates strongly with his voter base.³ Should this trend continue, it is likely to further weaken American commitments to European defense and NATO.

Therefore, the upcoming summit is expected to serve a key function for Europe to demonstrate it's willing to do more for its own defense since its current defense architecture, both conventional and nuclear, remains largely dependent on the U.S. The meeting will be seen as a likely opportunity to assure the Trump administration, accommodate its demands as much as possible, while seeking a realistic, negotiable balance between American expectations and European capabilities. One can expect that increasing defense spending, a top priority on Trump's agenda, will be a central topic of discussion and negotiation. Moreover, linking the rise in defense budgets to the purchase of U.S.-made military equipment would undoubtedly be a strong gesture aimed at satisfying Washington. However, a growing influx of American arms into Europe would deal yet another blow to the continent's pursuit of strategic autonomy and would undermine efforts to build safeguards against the potential withdrawal of U.S. security guarantees. As such, Europe is once again faced with a dilemma.



It is acknowledged that the impending shifts in European defense and the evolving geopolitical landscape in Ukraine, consequent to the change in administration in the US, are poised to exert the most substantial influence on the proceedings of this year's summit.

US PERSPECTIVE ON NATO

With the change in U.S. leadership, Washington's approach to international alliances and multilateralism has undergone a significant shift. It has also led to a major rupture in U.S. policy toward NATO. Since Trump's first term in office, he has expressed deep dissatisfaction with the Alliance's European members, criticizing them for not spending enough on defense and for relying excessively on U.S. security guarantees. The discontent has only intensified in his second term. Although the 2014 NATO summit set a target for members to spend at least 2% of their GDP on defense, many allies failed to meet that goal – even after the war in Ukraine broke out – further fueling American frustration.

³ "As NATO Reaches 75th Year, Americans Say It Is Still Essential to US Security," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 5 June 2024, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/nato-reaches-75th-year-americans-say-it-still-essential-us-security> (Accessed: 18.06.2025);

The shortcomings of European allies in defense spending was evident during Biden's term as well. However, Biden, with his liberal internationalist foreign policy, saw the strengthening of NATO at all costs, increasing American commitments to allies, and expanding the U.S. military presence on allied territories as viable approaches. Accordingly, Washington under Biden increased its responsibilities in Europe and expanded its military presence on the continent, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

TABLE 1: SELECTIVE NATO MEASURES TAKEN UNDER BIDEN PRESIDENCY

Date	Measure	Implementation
April 26, 2022	Ukraine Defense Contact Group	Strengthening and coordination of assistance for Ukraine
March 24, 2022	Multinational Battlegroups	Deployment of allied troops to the eastern flank of the alliance
June 28 – 30, 2022	New Strategic Concept ⁴	The revision of the 2010 Strategic Concept and the recognition of Russia as the most significant and direct threat
May 5, 2022	Ukraine's Inclusion in the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) ⁵	The expansion of the cyber defense umbrella with the full membership of Ukraine, alongside non-NATO members such as Finland, Sweden ⁶ , and South Korea
Feb. 25, 2022	Activation of the NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) ⁷	Enhancing the defense of Eastern Europe states and boosting deterrence against Russia
Jan. 20, 2023	Transformation of the Rammstein Format into a permanent mechanism ⁸	Laying the groundwork for the deployment of Leopard Tanks and deciding on HIMARS, Patriot, and F-16 trainings through the monthly meetings of the active NATO support mechanism

Source: NATO

The Biden administration also sought to maintain an uninterrupted aid policy toward Ukraine. Although this approach sparked various debates in Congress, the White House aimed to implement it without interruption.⁹ At that time, U.S. policy focused on providing as much military and non-military assistance as possible to help Ukraine continue its war efforts.

4 NATO, "NATO's Role in Defence Industry Production," last modified 10 July 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_210907.htm.

5 NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE), "The NATO CCDCOE Welcomes New Members: Iceland, Ireland, Japan, and Ukraine," *NATO CCDCOE*, 17 May 2023, <https://ccdcoe.org/news/2023/the-nato-ccdcoe-welcomes-new-members-iceland-ireland-japan-and-ukraine/>.

6 Finland and Sweden at the time were not NATO members.

7 Tod D. Wolters, "SACEUR Statement on the Activation of the NATO Response Force," *Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe*, 25 February 2022, <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2022/saceur-statement-on-the-activation-of-the-nato-response-force>.

8 Ukrayna Savunma İletişim Grubu, "17. Ramstein Formatı Toplantısı: Ukrayna için Kara Tabanlı Hava Savunma Koalisyonu Kuruldu," *Ukrayna Savaş Haberleri*, 23 November 2023, <https://war.ukraine.ua/war-news/meeting-ramstein-format-air-defence-ukraine/>.

9 Patricia Zengerie, "US Congress debates Ukraine aid as Pentagon warns money running low," Reuters, 2 Ekim 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-congress-debates-ukraine-aid-pentagon-warns-money-running-low-2023-10-02/> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

Term	Military	Financial	Total
2022	\$20.3 billion	\$13.0 billion	\$30.3 billion
2023	\$12.1 billion	\$30.2 billion	\$42.3 billion
2024	\$19.5 billion	\$22.9 billion	\$32.5 billion
Total	\$51.9 billion	\$55.2 billion	\$ 107.1 billion

Source: Department of Defense, USAID, Ukraine Oversight, Government Accountability Office

Unlike Biden, Trump believes that the U.S. is taking on excessive international commitments while its allies are not fulfilling their responsibilities. The Republican has built his core foreign policy toward NATO around this view. He did not hesitate to make harsh and provocative statements, including suggesting that countries failing to meet their defense spending commitments would not be protected in the event of an attack.¹⁰ Such statements implied a refusal to uphold Article V – the very foundation of NATO’s existence. As a result, there were occasional assessments in Europe suggesting that the U.S. might not come to its allies’ aid in the event of a Russian attack. Western intelligence agencies even claimed to have information indicating that Russia planned to test NATO’s Article V commitments.¹¹

Country	US Military Personnel (NATO missions)	US Military Personnel (European Command)
Germany	-	39,050
Poland	1,000	15,000
Italy	-	13,050
United Kingdoms	-	10,000
Romania	100	4,000
Spain	-	3,250
Türkiye	-	1,700
Belgium	-	1,150
Norway	-	1,100
Region	Total American Personnel	
Mediterranean	Sixth Fleet: 12,500	

Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, [Routledge, London: February 2024] ss. 50-52.

¹⁰ Trevor Hunnicuttt ve David Brunnstrom “Trump: If NATO members don’t pay, US won’t defend them,” Reuters, 7 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-if-nato-members-dont-pay-us-wont-defend-them-2025-03-07/> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

¹¹ “Russia has plans to test NATO’s resolve, German intelligence chief warns,” Arab News, 10 June 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2603980/world> (Accessed : 18.06.2025).

Therefore, the Trump administration adopted a pressure policy toward Europe and Ukraine. According to this approach, European allies are expected to fulfill their obligations, particularly regarding defense spending, while Ukraine is encouraged to adopt more modest war aims against Russia, given that the U.S. cannot provide indefinite support.

RISING DEFENSE SPENDING TARGET

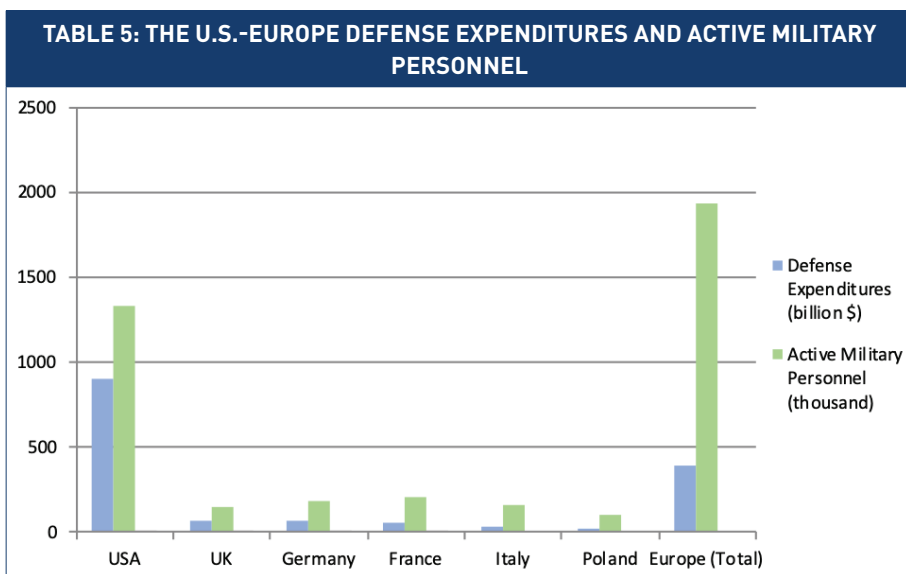
One of the most pressing issues on NATO's agenda over the years has been the inadequate defense spending by member countries. After the Cold War, European nations quickly redirected their economic resources from defense to civilian sectors in an effort to enhance social welfare. The shift was facilitated by a strong U.S. military presence on the continent and the sense of security provided by American security guarantees. However, Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy – beginning in the late 2000s with actions in the Caucasus, followed by the 2014 invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea – alongside China's emergence as a systematic challenger, has led the U.S. to increasingly question Europe's contribution to international security.

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
USA	3.71	3.51	3.50	3.28	3.26	3.47	3.58	3.53	3.31	3.23	3.38
Germany	1.19	1.19	1.20	1.23	1.25	1.35	1.51	1.45	1.51	1.64	2.12
United Kingdom	2.14	2.03	2.09	2.08	2.10	2.08	2.35	2.29	2.29	2.30	2.33
France	1.82	1.78	1.79	1.78	1.81	1.81	2.00	1.91	1.88	1.96	2.06
Poland	1.88	2.23	2.00	1.89	2.02	1.99	2.23	2.22	2.23	3.26	4.12
Türkiye	1.45	1.38	1.45	1.51	1.82	1.85	1.86	1.61	1.36	1.50	2.09
Canada	1.01	1.20	1.16	1.44	1.30	1.29	1.41	1.27	1.20	1.31	1.27
Italy	1.14	1.07	1.18	1.20	1.23	1.17	1.59	1.54	1.52	1.50	1.49
Spain	0.92	0.93	0.81	0.91	0.93	0.91	1.00	1.03	1.16	1.19	1.28
The Netherlands	1.15	1.13	1.16	1.15	1.22	1.32	1.41	1.36	1.44	1.66	2.05
Belgium	0.97	0.91	0.89	0.88	0.89	0.89	1.01	1.24	1.18	1.21	1.30
Greece	2.22	2.31	2.40	2.38	2.54	2.45	2.91	3.70	3.88	2.80	3.08
Montenegro	1.35	1.16	1.10	1.11	1.16	1.28	1.30	1.24	1.21	1.75	2.03
Bulgaria	1.31	1.25	1.24	1.22	1.45	3.13	1.59	1.52	1.59	1.96	2.18
Croatia	1.81	1.75	1.59	1.63	1.54	1.59	1.69	1.95	1.78	1.74	1.81
Czechia	0.94	1.02	0.95	1.03	1.10	1.18	1.30	1.39	1.34	1.37	2.10
Denmark	1.15	1.11	1.15	1.14	1.28	1.30	1.38	1.30	1.37	2.01	2.37

Estonia	1.93	2.03	2.07	2.01	2.01	2.04	2.30	2.03	2.16	3.04	3.43
Finland	1.45	1.45	1.42	1.38	1.39	1.45	1.53	1.40	1.68	2.09	2.41
Hungary	0.86	0.90	1.00	1.19	1.01	1.34	1.76	1.32	1.84	2.05	2.11
Latvia	0.94	1.03	1.44	1.59	2.06	2.02	2.16	2.09	2.12	2.87	3.15
Lithuania	0.88	1.14	1.48	1.71	1.97	2.00	2.07	1.96	2.45	2.78	2.85
Luxembourg	0.37	0.41	0.38	0.49	0.50	0.55	0.58	0.47	0.56	1.12	1.29
Montenegro	1.50	1.40	1.42	1.34	1.37	1.33	1.73	1.55	1.38	1.54	2.02
North Macedonia	1.09	1.05	0.97	0.89	0.94	1.16	1.24	1.45	1.61	1.81	2.22
Norway	1.54	1.58	1.73	1.71	1.72	1.84	1.97	1.68	1.46	1.46	2.20
Portugal	1.31	1.33	1.27	1.24	1.34	1.37	1.43	1.52	1.40	1.48	1.55
Romania	1.35	1.45	1.43	1.73	1.79	1.84	2.01	1.85	1.74	1.60	2.25
Slovakia	0.98	1.11	1.12	1.10	1.22	1.70	1.92	1.74	1.81	1.84	2.00
Slovenia	0.97	0.93	1.00	0.98	1.01	1.05	1.06	1.23	1.29	1.34	1.29
Sweden	1.06	1.01	0.97	0.97	0.97	1.04	1.09	1.42	1.45	1.66	2.14

Source: NATO

Accordingly, following the crisis over Crimea in 2014, NATO set a target for member states to allocate 2% of their GDP to defense spending. It is noteworthy that, even after a decade, some allies have still failed to meet this goal. Many assessments within NATO highlight that, unlike in 2014, most countries have now reached the target – presenting it as a success. However, it should be remembered that in most cases, significant increases in defense spending only took place after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.



Source: *The Military Balance 2024*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, (Routledge, London: February 2024) s. 54.



It is anticipated that the primary subjects of discourse at the forthcoming summit will pertain to the augmentation of defense industry production, the optimization of cost-effectiveness, and the assurance of standardization.

Moreover, the current security environment is increasingly seen as rendering the 2% target insufficient. As a result, the Trump administration has set a new benchmark of 5%.¹² Fully aware that most European allies would be unable to meet the 5% target but still aiming to satisfy the U.S. administration, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte has proposed a new formulation. Under his proposal, member states would commit to allocating 3.5% of GDP to core defense expenditures – such as equipment procurement, personnel costs, maintenance, operations, and training. An additional 1.5% will be set aside for defense-related infrastructure, including transportation, communications, and cyber capabilities.¹³ Some European countries, such as Germany, already have plans in place to modernize their civilian infrastructure. Rutte’s proposal appears to be an attempt to find middle ground between U.S. expectations and Europe’s capabilities and political will.

In conclusion, defense spending is expected to be one of the key agenda items at the upcoming summit, with the possibility of reaching some consensus on the nature and composition of future expenditures. The formula proposed by Rutte may serve as a bridge between U.S. expectations and Europe’s realistic capabilities.

WEST-RUSSIA DEFENSE PRODUCTION ASYMMETRY

Another critical issue on NATO’s agenda is the alliance’s position in defense industrial production vis-à-vis Russia. Western intelligence assessments indicate that Russia, on its own, is producing key military equipment at a higher volume and in a more cost-effective manner than Europe and the U.S. combined.¹⁴ Due to the war in Ukraine evolving into a war of attrition, particular emphasis has been placed on segments like ammunition and drone production. While it is known that Russia receives direct support from Iran and North Korea in these areas,¹⁵ it has also leveraged the acquired know-how to carry out various modifi-

12 Gavin Blackburn, “Trump, NATO üyelerinden savunma harcamalarını yüzde 5’e çıkarma planlarını duymak istiyor,” Euronews, 13 May 2025, <https://tr.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/13/trump-nato-uyelerinden-savunma-harcamalarini-yuzde-5e-cikarma-planlarini-duymak-istiyor> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

13 Chris Lunday, “NATO’s Rutte embraces 5 percent defense spending goal,” Politico, 26 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/mark-rutte-embrace-5-percent-defense-goal-nato-summit/>

14 Shona Murray, “Russia developing multiples more ammunition than NATO, says Secretary General Mark Rutte,” Euronews, 4 June 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/06/04/russia-developing-multiples-more-ammunition-than-nato-says-secretary-general> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

15 Matthew Loh, “Russia is relying so heavily on North Korea that it’s getting 50% of its ammo from Pyongyang, Ukraine’s spy chief says,” Business Insider, 25 February 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-50-percent-ammo-north-korea-ukraine-war-kyrylo-budanov-2025-2> (Accessed: 18.06.2025).

cations, enabling the deployment of different types of loitering munitions, kamikaze drones, and missiles on the battlefield.

Ukraine, for its part, recognized the importance of unmanned systems very early in the war. It has demonstrated notable effectiveness using unmanned aerial and maritime vehicles against major Russian platforms, both on land domain and in the Black Sea. Initiatives such as establishing an army of drones, innovative integration of civilian drones into military operations, and setting up drone production facilities have become active part of Ukraine's defense planning and execution. Most recently, Operation Spider Web against Russian nuclear-capable bombers revealed just how lethal unmanned systems can be when effectively planned against fixed critical targets. It has also sparked debates on how to protect military bases from such threats.

In this context, NATO allies are closely monitoring the combat environment in Ukraine and reviewing their defense plans and doctrines in line with emerging military-technological trends. One prominent idea within NATO currently is the return of the era of large inventories, and the notion that "quantitative" superiority is itself "qualitative" superiority. Accordingly, it is expected that increasing defense industrial production, improving cost-effectiveness, and achieving standardization will be among the main topics of discussion at The Hague summit.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ISRAEL AND IRAN

The Israel-Iran conflict is a new development that is also expected to influence the NATO Summit as reciprocal attacks continue to intensify. It could primarily impact the Ukraine issue on two fronts. First, there is the risk of rising oil prices, which due to heavy Russian exports would strengthen Moscow's economic power. While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is actively raising this issue, he is also pressuring the EU to further lower the price cap on Russian oil.

Secondly, if the crisis between Israel and Iran escalates further, there is a risk that the U.S. may suspend its support to Ukraine, particularly military aid, in order to assist Israel more effectively. This would be especially evident in the area of interceptor missiles, which Israel's air defense systems are rapidly depleting in response to Iran's missile attacks. For Trump and his administration, already reluctant to continue military aid to Ukraine, it could serve as a convenient justification.

Moreover, Israel's increasingly aggressive posture in the Middle East following the Hamas incursion on Oct. 7, 2023, suggests the adoption of a sort of "long war" doctrine and potential expansion of its operations against Iran. This narrows the options available to Trump on the Iran issue and raises the risk of the U.S. becoming inevitably drawn into the conflict in the long term. Any developments

along these lines in the coming days could further overshadow the effectiveness of the NATO summit.

CONCLUSION

NATO leaders' summits have often been occasions where significant decisions are made and messages of unity and solidarity are conveyed. At The Hague, it is expected that there will be reaffirmations of NATO's defensive and deterrence strength, the cohesion and unity of the alliance, and its continued existence as a nuclear military organization. However, due to the U.S.' strategic shift, expecting ambitious outcomes from the summit seems unrealistic. Instead, a likely outcome, facilitated by Secretary-General Rutte, would be the U.S. being assured by its European allies, commitments to European defense being maintained, and a unified message sent outward.

The key indicators of such a compromise, as discussed above, would be European allies increasing their defense spending, greater penetration of American weapons into the European market, and Ukraine adopting more modest war aims.

However, it remains unclear how any peace can be achieved without addressing President Zelenskyy's justified demand for security guarantees for Ukraine in exchange of territorial concessions to Russia.

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